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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 MANILA 000405

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MTS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINS](#) [KISL](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: MILF LEADERS CONCERNED ABOUT PEACE TALKS, SEEK
MORE ENGAGEMENT WITH U.S.

REF: A. MANILA 350 (PEACE TALKS FACILITATOR ON INTERIM
AGREEMENT)
[1](#)B. MANILA 251 (PARTIES SHARE DRAFT PEACE ACCORDS)
[1](#)C. 09 MANILA 2469 (MAGUINDANAO MASSACRE)
[1](#)D. 09 MANILA 2423 (MILF WELCOMES EAP A/S CAMPBELL
LETTER)
[1](#)E. 09 MANILA 2198 (CHARGE DISCUSSES PEACE TERRORISM
WITH MILF)
[1](#)F. 09 MANILA 1575 (INFORMAL PEACE TALKS THIS WEEK)

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Leslie A. Bassett,
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) peace panel told Poloff February 24 they are concerned about the Philippine government's ability to negotiate an interim peace agreement that can satisfy the MILF's expectations, and asked to engage with the U.S. on a more formal basis. MILF Peace Panel Chairperson Mohagher Iqbal and Member Michael Mastura said the MILF would attend the March 4 question-and-answer session in Kuala Lumpur sought by the Philippine government, but they remained sharply discouraged by the government's poor leadership and unconvinced the government had any new ideas to offer. Recalling the U.S. colonial relationship with Muslims in the southern Philippines, Mastura said the MILF wanted a "parallel dialogue" with the U.S. to regularize engagement with us and increase U.S. participation in the peace process, although he did not specify how such an arrangement might work. The MILF members said that the MILF could resort to violence -- or "Balkanize the region" -- if forced to, but the MILF has shown restraint and wanted to continue to avoid violence. While concerned about the course of negotiations, the MILF felt the International Contact Group had proven its usefulness. On upcoming national elections, Mastura said the MILF had been unable to engage with presidential candidates, and believed that Senator Aquino was unable to understand the complexities of the situation. END SUMMARY.

MILF CONCERNED ABOUT GOVERNMENT'S SINCERITY

[1](#)2. (C) Two members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) peace panel told Poloff over dinner February 24 that the MILF was "very unhappy" and increasingly concerned about the government's ability to negotiate an interim peace agreement because of its poor leadership and "phobic" unwillingness to acknowledge points from the defunct 2008 territorial agreement. MILF Panel Chairperson Mohagher Iqbal and Panel Member Michael Mastura, who invited Poloff and others to dinner at his private residence in Cotabato City, criticized the leadership of President Arroyo and government Peace Panel Chairperson Rafael Seguis following the 2008

collapse of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD). Mastura called President Arroyo "famous" for her policy reversals, and assailed her shift away from more flexible principles espoused by Seguis' predecessors. Seguis himself was "deaf," Mastura commented, adding, "We don't even know if he is listening," since he appeared to be texting on his phone during negotiations. "We are very unhappy with our status," Mastura lamented, while Iqbal added that the government seemed to be stalling.

13. (C) Citing another reason for MILF concern, Mastura cautioned that the government's "phobia" of the MOA-AD led to its omission of key consensus points in its comprehensive peace proposal (Ref B) -- a sign that the government's forthcoming interim proposal, anticipated in March, could fall far short of MILF expectations. "The government cannot think out-of-the-box," Mastura said, and its simple proposals rely too much on existing programs, such as expanding Islamic banking and education. Noting that the MILF would participate in a March 4 question-and-answer session with the Philippine government in Kuala Lumpur, Mastura emphasized that the MILF ultimately wanted to hear "ideas, not questions." They expressed hope that Office of the Presidential Advisor on the Peace Process (OPAPP) Assistant Secretary Bong Montesa, absent from the January talks, would attend the next meeting to lend his extensive experience to the government panel.

MILF PROPOSAL WOULD CREATE TRANSITIONAL ARRANGEMENT

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14. (C) Apologizing for launching into an informal lecture, Mastura explained that the MILF's draft interim agreement would establish a "transition process" for Moro autonomy that the MILF and the next Philippine administration would follow.

The draft (Ref A) has three main components: a six-and-a-half year timeframe, a particular sequence of actions to be undertaken by each side separately or jointly, and three distinct periods (pre-interim, interim, and implementation). (Note: Mastura did not provide the text, and Poloff did not reveal he had already seen it. End Note.) Mastura said the nature of the relationship between the proposed "Bangsamoro" entity and the central government was unclear, but could be federative, associative, or in another form. In this context, the "enhanced autonomy" offered by the government was insufficient. The MILF would not seek independence, and it eschewed the name "Bangsamoro State" in favor of "Bangsamoro," modeled on Kosovo's naming scheme. The Asia Foundation (TAF) Director Steven Rood, also at the dinner, noted that the most challenging aspect of the interim process would be passing a constitutional amendment permitting the creation of a Bangsamoro "Basic Law," as desired by the MILF.

SEEKING A "PARALLEL DIALOGUE" WITH THE U.S.

15. (C) In light of the MILF's limited confidence in the Philippine government, Mastura said that the MILF wanted to regularize our engagement through a "parallel dialogue" with the U. S. to support the peace process and come up with new ideas. He did not specify how the dialogue might work, but noted the dialogue would be known to the Philippine government and other parties. Mastura was unable to explain, despite Poloff's efforts to seek clarification, if "parallel" meant parallel to the work of the International Contact Group, or to the GRP-MILF talks.

16. (C) Along with their suggestion for a parallel dialogue, Iqbal and Mastura also made an impassioned plea for greater overall U.S. involvement. "Listen to how we feel," Iqbal implored. "The Filipinos are the rulers," he continued, "and we (Moros) are slaves. It is a lopsided relationship." Because the U.S. erred in including Mindanao in Philippine

territory when providing the Philippines with its independence, the U.S. "owed" the Moros its assistance. Official U.S. letters of support for the peace process notwithstanding, Mastura said, the U.S. has had no direct engagement in the substance of peace talks since the conclusion of the U.S. Institutes for Peace (USIP) programs several years ago. Poloff reiterated U.S. policy as outlined in the November 2009 letter from EAP A/S Kurt Campbell to MILF Chairman Murad. Poloff clarified that, while our USIP programs had concluded, U.S. engagement on the peace process had not. In the years prior to the MOA-AD, senior U.S. officials consistently and privately engaged the most senior members of the Philippine government to encourage them forward in peace negotiations.

CAUTION ABOUT MILF BACKLASH

17. (C) Demonstrating the MILF's dissatisfaction with negotiations, Mastura described the potential for an MILF backlash -- but also noted how its current posture was somewhat restrained. "We can still make trouble and Balkanize the area," Mastura warned. "Please do not allow us to do that." While Mastura said others had urged the MILF to pursue political assassinations of President Arroyo's Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita and North Cotabato province Vice Governor Manuel Pinol, the MILF "does not assassinate," even if it loathes the influence of these individuals who "have made a career" out of opposing peace in Mindanao. (Note: The flow of the conversation did not allow Poloff to interject and explicitly voice opposition to the notion of assassinations, but everyone present seemed clearly to understand the USG would find such acts abhorrent. End Note.)

18. (C) Iqbal said he also had doubts about the Philippine military's support for peace, but he and Mastura later agreed with Rood's assessment that military opinions toward the MILF had softened because of the military's increasing professionalization as well as its intense focus on fighting the Communist insurgency, trends that are analyzed in recent

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and upcoming research from The Asia Foundation. While describing foreign actors of the International Monitoring Team, Mastura said that the U.S. military was also a player in Mindanao, and that the Philippine military was "under" the U.S. military -- a perception that Poloff corrected, noting that U.S. forces were present only at the invitation of the Philippine government.

MILF SUPPORTS INTERNATIONAL CONTACT GROUP

19. (C) Mastura expressed support for the role of the International Contact Group (ICG) GRP and said it had played a useful role since its inception in December. The ICG's strong reaction to the government's anemic peace offer in January, Mastura said, could be taken as a successful example of the ICG's influence in the peace process. Rood noted that the ICG had also "hammered" the Philippine side to take the MILF comprehensive peace proposal seriously.

MILF THOUGHTS ON PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

110. (C) Responding to Poloff's question about MILF interaction with presidential candidates, Mastura noted that the MILF had not reached out to any of the candidates to lobby them on the peace process because none of the candidates appeared to take the issue seriously. As per stated MILF policy, the group did not expressly support or oppose political candidates. However, Mastura recounted one exchange he had with a member of Senator Benigno "Nonoy" Aquino's campaign, who asked if the Senator should have a policy on the peace process. Unimpressed, Mastura replied,

"It's too complicated for Senator Aquino to understand."

TERRORISM

¶11. (C) During the discussion of U.S. policy toward the MILF, Poloff highlighted the point in the letters from both A/S Campbell and then-A/S Kelly that the MILF needed to sever any ties to terrorists. Mastura did not respond to Poloff's comment. However, earlier in the conversation Mastura dismissively pointed out that the U.S. seemed to always raise the issue of terrorism, which he said was not relevant to the peace process.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) Mastura's and Iqbal's forceful statements -- the most heated language we have heard in recent months -- demonstrate that the MILF continues to view itself as the principal victim in its quest for Moro autonomy, wronged by the U.S. and history at the moment of Philippine independence, and struggling to reassert itself ever since in a region that has become home to increasing numbers of Christian migrants and that remains dominated by powerful Muslim clans. The MILF has previously sought U.S. intervention in the peace process, but was unable to articulate that vision to senior U.S. officials during several meetings in 2009 when they discussed the U.S. role (Refs D, E, F). While likely intended to increase pressure on the Philippine government, the MILF's new idea for a "parallel dialogue" could also be an attempt to create a counterbalance to the ICG, whose state members have no historical connection to the Moros and may therefore be perceived as inclined to side with the Philippine government. Post aims to explore the MILF's concept for "parallel dialogue," although we believe the timing is not right to establish any new mechanism.

¶13. (C) Given its popularity among the Moros of central and western Mindanao, the MILF may increasingly position itself as an antidote to the mix of money, violence, and clan power that has saddled development in the region and led to the November 23 massacre of 57 civilians in Maguindanao province, which eyewitnesses blame on the Ampatuan clan (Ref C). From this viewpoint, the autonomy sought by the MILF not only returns to the Moros their ancestral homeland, but also enables them to transition away from the region's broken political culture. At present, however, we have no basis to believe that the MILF would prove more capable than its predecessors of governing well. End Comment.

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ATMOSPHERICS AND BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

¶14. (C) Mastura was pleased to invite guests into his large but not ostentatious Cotabato City home, which he proudly noted abuts a madrasah that he established many years ago with funds the Brunei government had allocated for mosque construction. "We had enough mosques," Mastura said, so he told Brunei officials to build a school. The Islamic school, he noted, teaches all subjects, including English, science, and math. (Mastura and his wife lamented the declining number of skilled English speakers in Mindanao.) Burnishing his liberal credentials, Mastura said that he and his wife used to drink alcohol but had to give it up when conservative Muslims criticized them for it. Still, they did not feel out of place in the MILF: "Our (MILF) ideology is Islamic, but we are not ideologized." He continued, "There is a streak of liberalism in us (the MILF)." Mrs. Mastura, who does not wear a headscarf, did not participate in the substantive meeting but was present and opinionated at the casual dinner discussion. Mastura and Iqbal, fluent in English, both appeared comfortable with her presence in this setting. The Masturas said they have hosted many dinners with other

foreigners, including Steve Rood, at their home.

PARTICIPANTS

¶15. (SBU) The following people participated in the February 24 dinner and follow-on meeting:

Michael Pignatello, Political Officer, U.S. Embassy Manila
Mohagher Iqbal, MILF Peace Panel Chairman
Michael Mastura, MILF Peace Panel Member
Mike Marasigan, MILF Peace Panel Secretariat Member
Steven Rood, The Asia Foundation Country Representative for
the Philippines
Thomas Parks, The Asia Foundation Regional Director for
Conflict and Governance (Bangkok office)
Abhoud Linga, Director, Institute of Bangsamoro Studies

BASSETT